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Religious Elites in the Development Arena

Doing Development the Islamic Way in Contemporary Niger

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Doing Development the Islamic Way in Contemporary Niger

Abdoulaye Sounaye

Introduction

1 A colleague of mine who was conducting research on Islamic associations and development in Niger could hardly hide her disappointment after several weeks of fieldwork: “[W]ith these organizations, not much is happening in terms of development, despite their claims” (Dnyanada 2010).[1]On another occasion, one of my informants, an Islamic faith-based executive who had spent long years in development work in West Africa opened up to me about his experience in Niger: “It pains me to see so many development initiatives, but very little happening on the ground” (Ben Ali 2010).

2 These anxieties may well be flirting with the pessimism characteristic of the perception of development efforts in Africa, but they tell a story of a connection between Islam and development in Niger that has often been, if not overlooked, at least understudied. Despite this merit, these pronouncements fail to put the “work” of Islamic organizations in Niger into historical perspective. Not only that, they fail to see the new dynamics in the interaction between Islam and development actions. How is this interaction affecting the ways of doing development? What kind of actors and discourses are emerging within this context? And, how do actors understand both Islam and development as they strive to put to work Islamic and international development principles?

3 What is important in the quotes above is, thus, not so much that they are corroborated but that they reveal expectations from both of my interlocutors about Islam and development work in Niger. Twenty years ago, the concept of development hardly meant anything to the handful of Islamic associations in the country. Now, among the 55 legally authorized Nigerien Islamic associations, more than ten claim to undertake development actions in a way or another. A fifth may just be a number but in this case it is indicative of a discourse in which Islam and development have become major social and political signifiers. In effect, this discourse is now shaping not only the actions of ordinary

Nigerien Muslims but also development initiatives from domestic as well as transnational organizations. Mediating development through an Islamic framework has become a marker of both Islamic discourse and development action.

4 A quick look at the history of development interventions in Niger will show growing Islamic motivation with global Islamic NGOs, such as Islamic Relief, Qatar Aid and Al Basar International Foundation, but also among domestic associations and Muslim elites who are seeking to capitalize on their position and lead the way to social change. Particularly with these elites, looking at development through the lens of Islamic tradition has become a major preoccupation and even a practice through which they legitimize their presence in the public sphere. How this motivation is expressed, presented and actualized in the current context is of interest to students of Islam and development in Niger. Analyzing this trend will help to highlight an Islamic perspective on development initiatives in Niger and to understand how preoccupations about development are conceptualized and dealt with in contexts that cast themselves primarily as religious.

5 Scholars (Kaag 2008, 2009; Otayek & Soares 2009; Sadouni 2009a; Renders 2002) have shown that the marriage of Islam and development is not a new phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa. Even in Niger, major transnational initiatives in the name of Islam were already being undertaken in the late 1970s. I will argue that the current connection between Islam and development has led to two phenomena. First, it has urged NGOs operating in the country if not to rethink their development philosophies then at least to assert them explicitly. Second, the structural transformation of the Islamic sphere and the predominance of development discourse have resulted in the emergence of a new category of Muslim social activists who are adopting development roles as brokers and inventive mediators.

6 I do not intend to discuss the reason for the rise of Islamic NGOs in Niger. However, since this explains part of the process I am describing, a brief summary is called for, identifying three factors at play in the relatively rapid development of Islamic NGOs. First of all, the political context of liberalism that recognized the freedom of association has created the structural conditions for the marriage of Islamic and development discourses. The second factor is the economic context of neoliberalism, which has lead, in countries like Niger, to the state disengaging from major social sectors such as healthcare and has set the stage for various initiatives, especially those focusing on education, healthcare and welfare. Finally, the ideological context in which Islam is appropriated for identity politics (Holder 2009; Souley 2009; Clarke 2006; Casanova 1994) is worth mentioning because it has led to the emergence of a Muslim elite claiming a development role. Islamic NGOs have become the main avenue where elite entrepreneurs go beyond speculative arguments to put to work their vision of how development work ought to be carried out.

7 In general, as Otayek & Soares (2009) have pointed out, African Muslim elites have engaged humanitarianism with religious motivation. In Niger, local initiatives emerged after 1990 in an attempt to alleviate the effects of the economic and social policies dictated by neoliberalism. We have usually understood neoliberalism through its economic philosophies, relegating to the margins the human rights discourse that sets its foundations in recent democratization processes in Africa. Against these foundations, a trend of re-Islamization serves as a channel for organizations, both domestic and international, to undertake social projects and reach out to a wider audience. Multiform and pluralistic, this perspective has enriched the problematic of development by emphasizing the faith factor; it has also theoretically complicated the picture of Islam and

its appropriations in the public sphere. Along with local organizations, many international Islamic agencies have initiated charity and assistance programs. Most recently, the Qatar Charity has signed an agreement with the state to fund an educational project designed to support undertrained young Nigeriens. Similar initiatives have populated the domain of Islamic development in Niger since the emergence of an Islamic sphere seeking to do things in an Islamic way.

8 Still, the involvement of Muslim agents in development initiatives has remained mostly unnoticed and unstudied despite the increasing number of Islamic faith-based organizations that have become major players in many development sectors. One of the objectives of this article is to remedy this knowledge gap by providing a discussion on Islamic faith-based initiatives and Muslim actors as they enter the development arena.

9 To achieve this, I propose looking at the socio-political, but also the theoretical, context of the case I present. Then I give an account of the interventions by the Africa Muslims Agency in Niger, as an example of how a transnational Islamic faith-based agency perceives and undertakes development in Niger. Over the years, its philosophy has significantly changed along with the geography of its interventions. To illustrate the role some Muslim leaders are playing in development, the third section introduces Idrisa, a graduate of the Islamic University of Niger whose "contribution", as he puts it, is to help set the "communication bridge" between Muslims and international agencies promoting "pro-development behavior" (fertility management, water sanitation, immunization). Finally, in an attempt to link the cases I have discussed, I present some of the perspectives of my informants on doing development and look at how they redefine development and practice it within an Islamic framework. I argue that beyond these individual cases lies a shared preoccupation among Islamic faith-based organizations about development actions conforming to Islamic principles.

10 Two sets of data have been collected for the research that resulted in this article. The first was collected in Maradi in the summer of 2008[2]. The second set of data was collected from December 2009 to March 2010 in the Niamey area. In the process, I had a series of field trips, interviews and informal conversations with executives, employees and project beneficiaries as well as mediators of development initiatives. Using participant observation, I sought treatment at the Africa Muslims Agency (AMA) Eye Hospital in Niamey as a way to assess the significance of AMA's contribution to Niger's healthcare system. It was also an opportunity for me to see how AMA's discourse on changing development policies has materialized on the ground. I observed activities on sites, attended sermons and *ulama*[3] training sessions designed to raise awareness and facilitate the success of sensitization campaigns in Niamey.[4]

Context and Background

11 A juxtaposition of Niger's statistics and core development indicators could go as follows: 65% of its 15 million people live below the poverty line; 80% of this population are chronically affected by food insecurity and 12.3% by acute malnutrition; 42% lack access to clean water; 90% of the population live on 12% of the arable land; women's fertility rates are 7.19 births/woman, which is the highest in the world; and on the UNDP Human Development Index, the country scores 0.340, which is the lowest in the world.[5]

12 These figures mean that Niger is included among the poorest countries in the world. It is described as a place where harsh natural living conditions have combined with a lack of opportunities and low incomes to make it one of the most politically unstable, socially vulnerable and economically challenging. As such, it epitomizes the very context where every sector is a priority for development policies. The moral dimension of these conditions is regularly put forward in global efforts to alleviate poverty, improve women's conditions and fight deprivation and social inequalities. As in most Sub-Saharan countries, this picture of Niger ushers in international development assistance through NGOs.

13 Subsequently, Niger has seen a plethora of local and transnational NGOs in recent years, which have mainly focused on socioeconomic sectors such as food security, education and healthcare, but also on income-generating activities. Most of these organizations are secular but a handful are faith-based, with their initiatives shaped by the precepts of their religion. In a country where Muslims account for 95% of the population, it is not surprising that Islam has inspired many local and international initiatives. In fact, claiming Islam for development actions is not new in Niger. In the 1980s, several Islamic NGOs were operating outside the government-to-government pattern that dominated international aid, especially aid from Middle East countries.

14 In addition to the organization I introduce below, Africa Muslims Agency, which launched its first project in Niger in 1985, one could also mention the Saudi-sponsored World Muslim League (*Ligue Mondiale Islamique au Niger*) that has been running a "second chance" school and a health clinic for the past three decades. Hundreds of young secondary-school students have enrolled in the school to take their exams for a second or third time in an attempt to gain access to university. Underprivileged children are generally given priority as a way of combating social inequalities. Initially, the most active section of the NGO was its health services and the school, which was located in the same compound on the Haro Banda area of Niamey. In the beginning the school was hardly regarded as serious and competitive. Over the years however, it has slowly established itself as one of the most successful schools, based on its national baccalaureate exam results.

15 In the last decade and following a global trend, the number of Islamic organizations claiming development roles has significantly increased. The most recent Islamic NGOs include the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), Qatar Aid, Jamaat Ahmmadiya, Al Basar International Foundation, Muslim Hands and Islamic Relief. Healthcare, food security, education and access to water constitute their primary sectors of intervention. Often, their projects may also include the construction of madrasas and mosques and the equipping of centers with computers. While these organizations have signed formal conventions with the government, they have consistently sought direct contact with their beneficiaries, implementing a major principle of contemporary development framework: having as little as possible to do with state bureaucracy. This attitude rests on the conclusion that state-led development has failed, a standpoint that is consistent with the current assessment of neoliberal development efforts in Niger and the global south (Bush, 2007).

16 Until organized Islam voiced its concern about major state social initiatives (Sounaye 2005), state institutions framed most development discourses and policies. In many ways, as is the case in most countries in the developing world (Rapley 1996), doing development remained the preserve of the state, in particular because of the assumption that the state

is the primary mediator of development. The statism that framed development policies in Niger played a significant role in the way development initiatives have been shaping up since the 1990s. Prior to the period when international donors intervened, they did so mainly through state institutions. Until the mid-1980s, state institutions determined the priorities, designed the intervention plans and provided the personnel. This centrality of state institutions – in the conception and the execution of development – limited individual and private initiatives. In controlling the public sphere and limiting non-state sponsored actors, the military regimes (Kountche: 1974-1987; Saibou: 1987-1991) that ruled the country prior to democratization in the 1990s made it impossible for private actors in Niger to emerge in the Islamic sphere.[6]

17 When the liberal view of civil society became the norm in the Nigerien public sphere, fragmentation of authority ensued, with local actors claiming increasing eligibility for the *zakat*.[7] Among the new Islamic associations, many accessed shares of the Saudi and Kuwaiti *Zakat* funds for their own projects. In this instance, *madrasas* and mosque projects proved successful in gaining the financial support of Middle Eastern monarchies. The translation of liberalism at the local level consisted of breaking with state tutelage and sponsorship, and seeking development funds outside the realm of the state. At the same time, political liberalization and the fragmentation of the religious sphere led the state and international agencies to open up to religion-based opinions as these have shown their potential for political mobilization. In the 1990s, as Clarke (2006) argued, international development took a "faith matters" turn that affected its discourses and policies. In Niger one could easily argue that for three categories, Islam has never mattered as much as in the current context: (1) for international agencies, such as UNICEF, that needed new strategies to pass on messages in a domain like immunization; (2) Islamic faith-based organizations, such as the Africa Muslims Agency (AMA), that operate in conformity with Islamic ethics are important; and (3) the Muslim "development entrepreneurs" (Otayek & Soares 2009) like Idrisa, the leader of an Islamic organization that I introduce below who has reinvented himself as a mediator between the so-called developers and the beneficiaries of their projects.

18 In general, even though Islamic faith-based organizations are still secondary actors when it comes to development initiatives, it should be noted that they have been instrumental in shaping the state's position on major international conventions on several occasions (Alidou 2008; Idrissa 2005; Moulaye 2006; Sounaye 2005). Among these organizations, criticism and rejection have not been the only attitudes towards state-sponsored initiatives. Participation has been another pattern of organized Islam's presence in the public sphere as Islamic organizations and individual Muslim leaders have given support to the state and international agencies. Whether with family planning or HIV/AIDS projects, *ulama* have contributed, if not to run the initiatives, at least to raise awareness with respect to disease prevention among communities across the country.

Changing Development Practices in Niger? The Case of the Africa Muslims Agency

19 AMA launched its operations in Niger in 1985, the same year it started in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Niger was one of the countries hardest hit by a succession of draughts and famines that left most people in the countryside in chronic need of food assistance. AMA thus sought to help alleviate the hardship of living conditions with

interventions in healthcare, food assistance, water and education. A humanitarian call prompted AMA's first projects in Niger. In the areas where they were initiated, orphanages and dispensaries were set up to benefit the communities. Ben Ali, one of my informants proudly observed: "AMA is the first Islamic agency to start development projects in Africa."[8] The Kuwaiti Emir's financial support helped start AMA's first interventions in the country.

20 The agency's projects in Niger are geared towards community benefit. "We never fund projects for individuals; our focus is the community and its benefits."[9] AMA has a vision of collective ownership of its projects, a philosophy that seeks to ensure a lasting impact. The emphasis on the community and collective welfare in AMA's perspective is nothing but a way of following the recommendation of Islam. Ben Ali, an AMA program manager, attempted a comparison: "It is like building a mosque or an orphanage; you never build them for one single individual or family."[10] As a result, AMA funds various micro-projects, orphanages, schools and medical centers across Niger that are expected to have a direct and immediate impact on communal life. So far, the most peculiar project it has funded is a domestic waste-collection project that a group of unemployed young people started in Niamey. Ben Ali takes this project as an example of AMA's *ouverture* (availability) to receive, examine and eventually fund any project with the potential to improve communal life. Limiting funding to group projects is not only expected to increase the standard of living of the community, it also encourages better managerial practices and has broader impact. Ben Ali's criticism of development action at the beginning of this article resonates here. He justifies this philosophy of intervention: "many of our projects failed because some have been diverted from their initial goals or ownership". In fact, infrastructures built on private land have led to major disputes that have disrupted the life of the community and reduced the real impact of the investment. Several are still unresolved and pending court cases, with parties claiming either ownership or compensation, especially when the projects are a *madrasa* or a health centre built on a private land. In these cases, the projects have "created problems among people", my interlocutor concludes.

21 Obviously, the complexity of land tenure has affected AMA's policies. In a move to seek more efficiency and minimize the impact of local politics, "now, whenever we build a school or a health centre, we make sure AMA owns the land". For the same reasons and to increase ownership, AMA also avoids doing the project itself, except in a few cases: "We were building infrastructures fifteen years ago, but about five or six years ago, we ended that. Now, when we build an infrastructure, we manage it" (Ben Ali 2010). An illustration of this change lies across the street from the AMA Niger headquarters in Wadata, Niamey, where the NGO has built an eye hospital (*Hôpital Ophtalmologique Makka*) that treats patients from across Niger.

22 AMA's policy change is also illustrated by the diversification of its activities and the scope of its interventions. It still funds orphanages, schools and dispensaries, but has also added women's training centres, a youth vocational training centre (Centre Ousseimi, Basora) and has gradually encouraged income-generating activities (dressmaking, embroidery, etc.). The map of AMA interventions now includes areas beyond Niamey, where most of its projects used to be based. In 1997, AMA used to have three dispensaries and an orphanage in Niamey, but now has several regional centres in the central-southern town of Maradi, Tahoua in the north and Tillaberi in the western part of the country. As a way of putting in practice its policy of helping the underprivileged, AMA has systematically

built orphanages, mostly for fatherless daughters, as "a form of social service that directly benefits Nigerien families", according to Ben Ali.

23 Over the years, AMA's intervention principles have significantly changed, adjusting to both the socio-political context and the international development environment. Not willing to deal with the state's institutions and intermediaries, Ben Ali observes, "we want to be in direct contact with people; that's why our name has changed. We are now AMA-Direct Aid". The pledge to be more efficient and in a close contact with communities has transformed the agency, according to Ben Ali. Following a global discourse on development and strategies to achieve it, especially in the African context, AMA Niger envisages devoting most of its funds to initiatives on the ground. To this end, the agency has restructured its budget to cut administrative costs and allocate most of its resources to actual projects.

24 This is not the only issue AMA has to deal with, however. In effect, fundraising and provisions for Niger may have been plunging as AMA International has expanded its activities and the scope of its interventions. The perceptions of the agency have been affecting both external funding and the receptivity of its initiatives at the local level. A few years ago, as its employees confirmed, AMA was primarily viewed as the "alms-giving hand" of the oil rich Middle Eastern monarchies, mainly Kuwait. As such, most people thought it was only interested in performing a religious act, i.e., giving alms and distributing *Zakat* to the needy. Today, AMA's policies want to appear more development oriented as it subjects its initiatives and operations to strict managerial criteria. This professionalism, as Ben Ali calls it, is expected to help the agency achieve its goal of building self-sufficiency and community-based development. A statement he made during our conversation captures this: "We don't have petrodollars despite what people may think; we are not giving petrodollars. We are more professional and looking for ways to be more useful".[11] But being useful requires interventions that are not determined a priori: "We take into consideration the context and the needs people express. We request projects and then after evaluating their feasibility, we fund them. The ideas for our projects come from the groups."[12]

25 As far as AMA's projects are concerned, the most popular are the Community Grain Banks (CGB). Their popularity in the Nigerien context comes from their immediate impact whenever harvests are insufficient and food shortages affect the country. NGOs such as Islamic Relief, Plan International and CARE have adopted this strategy to make grain available, but also to fight price inflation, in particular during the lean season. A community-owned initiative, the CGB is managed by a board appointed by the community. Individuals receive loans they are expected to repay over a pre-determined period of time. In most cases, because of the low level of cash flow, the loans are repaid in kind. Depending on the case, the bank receives the initial capital from the donor NGO or its partners. Chronic food shortages prompted reliance on these as a mechanism to help alleviate or prevent famine. The 2005 food crisis in Niger, which received global publicity (Crombé & Jézéquel 2009), reinforced the idea that such an approach works, but also that a community-based assistance program is the most efficient way of dealing with food shortages. For example, the transnational Islamic Relief, whose expansion into Niger was prompted by the same 2005 food shortages, relies heavily on this mechanism and on free food distribution across the western region of the country.

26 AMA has espoused this method as a way of assisting communities that depend on grains but also as an illustration of its direct aid philosophy. Generally, when a community has

agreed on the idea of a CGB, they submit a proposal to AMA. When granted, "our support is only for one year. We may assist the bank for an additional year, but never more than two years. The third year, the organization is on its own."[13] This policy is intended to promote autonomy and accountability, which are two principles AMA has strictly followed for the last six years. If a group manages its CGB well in the first two years with the means AMA provides, the group then comes to own it and is responsible for its sustainability. This has been working well, according to Ben Ali, and "all 28 CGBs that started last year have been granted a second year of support."[14]

27 In general, according to my AMA interlocutors, "most loans are paid on time."[15] This is a way for them to measure the success of their CGB projects. For Habu, "this is how things should be among Muslims". For Ben Ali and Isa, the management skills and the main values that frame their view of development work made this achievement possible. Obviously, in many instances these values are not exclusive to AMA but are a set of core values on which international development is based.

28 In concluding this section, I observe that the idea that assistance should go directly to the needy has been reinforced by the neoliberal ideal of state non-interventionism. Doing without the state and prioritizing communities' direct access to assistance is now part of AMA's intervention principles, at least according to their funding guidelines. However, whether this has been fully implemented is a matter of debate, especially because of the culture of development brokerage that has been shaping NGO interventions in Niger. In any case, attentive analysis shows that AMA, like many Islamic development actors, operates in two different registers: on the one hand it claims to follow international standards, while on the other, it portrays itself as an NGO whose principles are grounded in the Muslim values of social welfare and justice.

Mediating Development: The Bridge between International Agencies and Ordinary Muslims[16]

29 A significant number of the 55 local Nigerien Islamic organizations[17] are involved in development work in the form of social welfare and raising awareness regarding state social policies and international conventions.[18] Fauziya[19]is one of the organizations that has found an opportunity to draw on the Islamic tradition "to serve development purposes" in the current context. Fauziya belongs to the second generation of Islamic organizations that were created after the political reform in the 1990s that restructured the Islamic sphere. While the first group emerged under the leadership of *ulama* and reputed Muslim leaders, most of the second generation were created and ruled by graduates of Islamic learning institutions claiming public roles in Niger. Both groups therefore belong to the post-single party rule, with Fauziya and similar institutions emerging approximately a decade later. As leadership disputes add to theological divergences, the younger generation is distancing itself from the initial organizations, most of which were under the patronage of renown *ulama*. The younger generation has regularly criticized the *ulama* for either complacency vis-à-vis the state or lack of sound knowledge (Niandou 1993; Sounaye 2009). For many of these young organizations, breaking ties with a "traditional Islam" too prone to maintaining the status quo and escaping the influence of their *ulama* representatives became a major goal.

30 Fauziya epitomizes this trend of rejuvenation of organized Islam that has severed ties with the *ulama* and is seeking to restructure the Islamic sphere. Idrisa, a leader of this organization, exemplifies this new Islamic leadership. He is one of the trainers and has been involved in many workshops over the last few years. During the week of my first conversation with him, he was preparing several upcoming training sessions, two of which had been ordered by the UNICEF office in Niamey and another by the *Programme Élargi de Vaccination*, the branch of Niger's Ministry of Health that is in charge of immunizations. All three courses were related to social policies and were designed for *ulama* with prominent roles in their respective communities. "We use the Islamic tradition to explain to people what the policies and [development] programmes are about," Idrisa said.[20]

31 The need for these types of mediators became particularly evident when family-planning programs met with the opposition and eventually the rejection of the *ulama* at the beginning of the 1990s. Idrisa was aware of this and recognized that many ideas and initiatives would have had different outcomes if they had been sufficiently mediated. In fact, several heated controversies in the country have made it necessary for development interventions to walk a fine line, especially in domains such as reproductive health and immunization, which have proved to be sensitive topics for Muslims in Niger. Idrisa can thus justify the reason for focusing on communication strategies. Drawing lessons from the rejection of the 1994 Family Code project, Fauziya has made communication its main domain of intervention. Idrisa, for example, is working to build a "communication bridge" (*le pont de la communication*) between international agencies like UNICEF, and ordinary Muslims who generally lack access to the Islamic scriptures because of linguistic barriers. Mediators like Idrisa are key players because a project often succeeds or fails based on their work. "They sensitize both the developer and the developee, and they are the fulcrum of communication. They navigate that confusing space between developer's and developee's contexts, often being asked to clarify misunderstandings, apologize for unintended insults, and bring together the developer's idea for the project with the needs and priorities of the developees" (Hartman-Mahmud 2003: 526)

32 Idrisa has been involved in this field of development for several years, working for the Nigerien Muslim population while crafting strategies and messages for public sensitization and mobilization campaigns. A case known as the Polio Controversy illustrates the importance of the interventions to which Idrisa and his organization are committed. This controversy refers to Muslim leaders' calls in 2003 to boycott immunization campaigns amid allegations that the vaccines contained anti-fertility drugs and were part of a plot against Muslims. The allegations spread rapidly as *ulama* claimed that promoters of the population reduction policy were using the polio eradication campaign to achieve their goal. This made sense to many Muslims in Niger who had previously resisted family planning initiatives, particularly in the 1990s (Alidou, 2005; Sounaye; 2005).

33 The actual controversy broke out in northern Nigeria (Gwarzo 2011; Yahya 2006) in a context of *shari'a* implementation and competition among Muslim elites. It then spilled over into villages and towns in Niger with the help of preachers who adopted it as a religious mission to fight the immunization campaign. Some *ulama*, using sermons and any public exposure they could find, in particular audiovisual media, called on Muslims to decline offers of immunization. In Maradi, the most affected region in Niger, the

significance of the issue led to UNICEF and state campaigns countering the boycott. The communication strategy that UN agencies and the state designed consisted of finding allies among the *ulama* and local customary authorities. Pro-immunization preaching and gatherings were organized across the region while UNICEF and the Ministry of Health requested more involvement from local and religious authorities. In February 2003, the campaign went as far as requesting the intervention of President Tandja and senior government officials in an effort to quell the impact of anti-immunization messages. In the small town of Dan Isa near the Nigerian border, Nigerien officials supported by UNICEF, the Polio Eradication Initiative and the World Health Organization launched the Dan Isa Initiative that actively promoted the polio immunization campaign, with the involvement of *ulama*.

34 The anti-boycott campaign was relatively successful since immunization boycott calls have all but disappeared. But the issue is still a cause for concern, especially because polio cases, which had been decreasing in the 1990s, are now on the rise again, although only by a few cases a year. One of my informants at the PEV (*Programme Élargi de Vaccination*[21]) blames this resurgence on the 2003 immunization boycott, the effect of which is still visible in the last three years' polio cases. Recent statistics, for example, show that polio cases in Niger went from 11 in 2007 to 12 in 2008. In 2009, 15 cases were identified, though initial plans had forecasted the eradication of the disease by 2005.[22]

35 Referring to the polio vaccine controversy, Idrisa argues that Islamic tradition not only authorizes taking measures to prevent the spread of an epidemic but that there are many instances in the *hadiths* where Muhammad recommended such practices. He asserts: "Allah says: 'only senility and death have no cure'. God makes the disease, but also its cure. No disease exists without a cure. So, Muslims should know this [verse of the Qur'an]." From Idrisa's perspective, knowing similar verses is the first step to acquiring the science and the knowledge Muslims should cultivate in their fight against the obscurantism of many *ulama*. The *ulama* Idrisa is referring to are those who saw a plot to "eliminate Muslims" in the polio vaccine: to counter them, nothing could be more efficient than educating the masses. In his mediating role, Idrisa's contribution seems to be appreciated by many of his NGO collaborators and he has found a meaningful field for development strategists. "Communication is crucial, and we need to focus on it", he has repeatedly argued. He is aware that as long as there are development initiatives affecting the way Muslims view themselves, there will be a need for the kind of work his organization does.

36 A series of pamphlets he was planning to hand out to trainees summarizes the approach. In those we examined together, Idrisa has listed several Qur'anic and/or *hadith* references for each idea he planned to discuss. This was a way for him to convince the *ulama* to embark on the pro-immunization and pro-family planning campaigns. Because of their influential social positions, winning over these leaders would represent a crucial step in popularizing the ideas that the campaigns present. As he told me, "we [his organization and himself] have been able to convince *ulama* who were initially reluctant to accept our ideas."[23]

37 In targeting *ulama*, this approach seeks primarily to broaden support and build a favorable *ulama* base. It is assumed that the support *ulama* lend to social development initiatives will eventually trickle down and dissipate resistance and opposition. This has been part of the strategy that UN agencies and the Niger government have adopted to counter negative reactions that have doomed development initiatives, especially at the

local level where the power of the *ulama* to shape perceptions and alter collective behavior could not be rivaled. In this context, winning the *ulama* over may be difficult but it is usually worth the effort, not only because of their role as the depository of sacred power, but also because of their position in the configuration of local politics.

38 Drawing conclusions from the polio controversy in Nigeria, Yahya (2006) argues that dispelling public anxieties about international agencies contributes a great deal to the success of their projects. In Niger, the decision state officials and international agencies have made to focus on a counter-boycott campaign has represented an invitation for organizations such as Fauziya that focus on communication and mediation to take public roles. As Idrisa noted, "development is about changing behavior and giving people the information they need to make their decisions. [Therefore,] a well-informed decision is better than a blind following of the *alem* [Muslim cleric]." The notion of communication Idrisa uses here could be understood more broadly as communication in any development sector that needs the assistance of learned Muslim leaders. Idrisa's narrative consists of portraying the *ulama* who opposed the immunization campaigns as ignorant and lacking the sound knowledge to speak for Islam.

39 Within the public sphere in Niger, many Muslims who share Idrisa's view have demarcated themselves from the ordinary *ulama,* who usually have limited competency in Arabic. As a graduate of the Islamic University of Say, Niger, Idrisa endeavors to fight what he sees as misrepresentations of both "development actions" and the Islamic tradition. He builds on the social capital Arabic literacy provides in contemporary Niger, where only a select few know Arabic, the language of the scriptures. On the one hand, he claims to serve Muslims by presenting the message of Islam to his fellow countrymen and, on the other hand, he is assisting international organizations in delivering their message. Idrisa's pro-development perspective and opposition to 'counter-development actions' obviously makes him less critical of the agencies and state institutions with which he collaborates. His role, as he sees it, does not include critical engagement of the message. Rather, as a broker, he plays the role of translator as he draws on the Islamic conceptual framework to secure the support of fellow Muslims.

40 A critical appraisal of this position may show that, from Idrisa's perspective, development is better understood as a process in which people try to find the most efficient strategy to change their attitudes and social behavior. Thus, Idrisa's role is not only about formatting campaign messages and readying them for a local consumption and cultural fitness. He is pro-development, as he argues, not because he believes all initiatives are beneficial to people but because he is preoccupied with the potential for change and its justification through an Islamic framework. In this regard, Fauziya has produced many reports, pamphlets and other communication strategy documents in order to prove Islam's acceptance of practices such as family planning, girls' education, immunization, etc. After we examined a 'message' he had designed for a seminar meant to raise *ulama* awareness of the risks of early and under-age marriages, he remarked: "Most Muslims who oppose these initiatives don't actually know the position of the Islamic tradition on these issues; and from the justifications I hear, obviously, they don't know where to find these positions; they just don't have the knowledge."[24] This sets up the stage for a long tirade against the *ulama* he associates with obscurantist leaders eager to take advantage of the people's lack of Islamic learning. As he added later, "the *ulama* may well be revered in the society, but most of them have a limited knowledge of the Islamic tradition."

41 To support his claims that vaccination is not foreign to Islam, he points to a *hadith* that relates Khalif Umar's trip to Sham during which, after part of the delegation entered a city, word came that an epidemic had broken out. When the Prophet was informed, he immediately sent recommendations for "preventive measures similar to the polio immunization we are doing today." According to Idrisa, if Muslims know of similar episodes, they would think twice before they turn down the immunization offers. This may sound very simplistic as it stresses only one dimension in the issue regarding Muslims' opposition to development policies, but it draws on a trend of *Sunna* discourses that are seeking to re-Islamize Nigerien society. Following in the footsteps of the Prophet (to paraphrase Ramadan's formula [2007]), has been one of the patterns of Muslims' public behavior in the last few years (Alidou & Alidou 2008; Souley 2005; Sounaye 2009). This perception of Islam and how Muslim practices ought to be has inspired numerous organizations and various discourses in Niger. To dissipate resistance, Fauziya also had to justify the ideas it communicates and the attitudes it recommends. That is why the reference to the prophetic tradition has become a major trait of Idrisa's public discourse.

42 As one may see, agents like Idrisa navigate between two worlds and portray themselves as developers whose function is twofold. On the one hand, they are educating people to open up to dialogue and communication, a prerequisite for the fruition of development initiatives. On the other hand, they provide international agencies and culturally ill-defined initiatives with religious justification and a framework acceptable to Muslims. As an intermediary between two parties, they act both as culture translators who seek to dispel misrepresentations, and social engineers who are designing messages that lessen suspicion and reinforce relations between parties. At this intersection of roles and registers, Idrisa capitalizes on his skills as a product of the *medersa* (a school model that combines French and Arabic). His knowledge of the Qur'an combined with his linguistic skills (he also speaks Hausa and Zarma, the two main national languages of Niger) make him part of an elite that development agencies dearly need in Niger.

43 Fully aware of the social and political influence they may have in this position, organizations like Idrisa's are acting for "the well being of our brothers and sisters" and for "development to happen," as they say. In this context, Idrisa wants to cast himself as a new type of Muslim leader who, from a pro-development position, will affect Muslims' representations and behavior. Because of the previous controversies surrounding social development programs related to family planning and population-growth policies, it has become clear that to alter values and behavior, UNICEF and similar organizations need cultural understanding but, most importantly, they need brokers like Idrisa and his organization who can provide a grounding in Islamic tradition, an approach that seems more convincing than any material provision.

Ways of Doing Development: Is There An Islamic Way?

44 As AMA finds ways of implementing and passing on an understanding of development that follows Islamic precepts, for example, the 0% interest rate they practice and promote, Idrisa is attempting an Islamization of development initiatives as he seeks to translate the messages agencies and organizations hope to deliver into Islamic idioms. These are only two perspectives that contribute to a redefinition and a reinterpretation of development. They illustrate the ongoing desire of Muslims to mark their presence in an arena where they have often been absent. While AMA is intervening in this arena as a

funding agency, Idrisa, as a mediator and broker, is building the development bridge. In this instance, they represent a transformation that sees Islamic faith-based organization and Muslim activists now taking leading roles in humanitarian and development actions.

45 In effect, the proliferation of Islamic faith-based organizations has followed a global trend that has seen the emergence of Islamic transnational NGOs launching welfare programs (Singer 2008). Alleviating poverty and suffering across the world (Singer 2008; Clarke 2007; Ferris 2005; Benthall, Jerome & Bellion-Jourdan 2003; Weiss 2002) have often been listed among their goals. This development pattern is perceptible in Niger, not only with AMA but also with transnational Islamic organizations such as the Ahmadiyya organization, Islamic Relief and Qatar Aid. In the last five years, the country has faced two major famines (in 2005 and 2010) that prompted massive international assistance to which Islamic faith-based organizations contributed significantly despite their limited resources compared to the 'traditional' development agencies and organizations. Their approach consisted essentially of providing grain, services (healthcare) and facilities (wells, mosques, dispensaries and orphanages) in suburban and rural areas. Niamey's suburbs and Tillaberi rural areas are two illustrations of areas that received such interventions.

46 Besides the chronic vulnerability of the country, as evidenced by the 2005 and 2010 food crises, recent democratization processes and neoliberal development philosophies have shaped how AMA and Idrisa – the foci of my discussion here – represent themselves as segments of civil society. It is interesting to see how the neoliberal understanding of civil society has also influenced their initiatives. However, the fact that neoliberal policies resulted in the erosion of the state's role – especially in social sectors – and the opening up of development to civil society (McDuie-Ra & Rees 2010; Weiss 2002) is not enough to explain the current proliferation of Islamic NGOs. The evidence suggests two concomitant processes.

47 The first consists of the global assertiveness of Muslims, as Eickelman & Piscatori (2004) show, particularly in domains where they seek participation and where they have been either absent or quiet. How Muslims see themselves participating and being represented within various socio-political spheres, including the development sector, seems to be the critical mark of this process. In Niger the claims of more than 20% of domestic Islamic organizations can be read as an indicator of such a trend. Various reasons lie behind this development, from the desire to provide Muslims with a voice to the mere strategy of capturing *Zakat* funds, which has led in recent years to fierce competition among Islamic organizations. Beyond Niger and across Africa, a similar trend is also perceptible (Kaag 2008; Weiss 2007, 2000; Renders 2002).

48 The second process involves the emergence of an Islam-based development discourse. While the practices and discourses in the process I describe above may be secular, the second process is generally tied to religiosity. The most critical element in this process is the tradition and the values and norms it conveys. Theologically guided, the effort can be viewed as an attempt to put religious obligations and recommendations into practice. For example, *Zakat* and *Sadaqah*[25] are concepts that pervade AMA's vocabulary but also the operational frameworks of faith-based organizations such as Islamic Relief (Abuarqub & Philips 2009). Through philanthropist appropriations of Islam, these organizations are seeking to popularize new perceptions and implement practices of development based on Islamic norms. Organizations such as Islamic Relief, Qatar Aid and AMA share the goal of an alternative development. This recalls the post-modern and post-colonial move to

critique the concept and the model of development applied to the Third World (Matthews 2004;Escobar 1984). The alternative presented by many development initiatives in Niger – and certainly across the world, as the literature shows – relies on redefining development action and seeking to fight poverty through a religious framework. In the Islamic context, *Zakat*, *Sadaqah* and forms of *waqf*[26]are viewed as the resources that would contribute to social justice.

49 Obviously, this understanding of doing development is not new terrain for Muslim actors (Weiss 1998) but in countries such as Niger, the explicit connection between Islam and development is only now being articulated. Not only are interventions conceived as being part of a religious approach to fighting poverty, they are also being reinterpreted and redefined as ways of following Islamic principles. One key illustration I came across relates to the Ahmadiyya inauguration of a well rehabilitation project in 2009. To give meaning to the project, the representative of the organization leading the ceremony drew from the prophetic tradition in the following terms: "While moving from Mecca to Medina, our prophet Muhammad (P.U.H) [Peace be Upon Him] showed us the significance of providing water for our fellow brothers and sisters, when he purchased a well from a Jew."[27]

50 An Islamic motivation, as Renders (2002), Sadouni (2009b) and Otayek & Soares (2009) observed, informs Islamic NGOs' actions. The previous quote confirms this view. Doing development in an Islamic way in this instance may not necessarily carry overt claims of proselytism. Compassion, for example, suffices to give an Islamic connotation to the action. The global Islamic organization Islamic Relief is one illustration of such a mode of operation. The organization launched operations in Niger during the 2005 food shortage and since then has developed various programs including grain distribution, healthcare clinics, orphanages, well digging and water sanitation. One of the most public activities of this organization is the food distribution that occurs during the Muslim festivals at the end of the Ramadan (*Eid al fitr*) and Tabaski (*Eid al adha*). Obviously, the choice of these specific rituals reinforces the symbolic nature of the initiatives and adds a clear Islamic tone to the assistance.

51 As the genealogy of Islamic NGOs' intervention in Africa has highlighted (Otayek & Soares 2009; Sadouni 2009; Kaag 2009; Clarke 2006), Christian NGOs have emulated many Islam-inspired initiatives. However, Islamic faith-based organizations do not want to be viewed as exclusively devoted to Muslims, even though participation in some of their programmes requires "being a good Muslim." Ben Ali has persistently pointed to the international norms AMA follows, and observed that "we are more professional" in order to counter a negative perception of the agency. The efforts to be more professional include strict managerial practices that balance expenditure and focus on immediate impact. One can perhaps read the signs of this claim of professionalism in the frugality of AMA's offices. On the day of my first interview at the AMA Niger headquarters in Wadata, while waiting for my informant to arrive, I was struck by how clean, frugal and quiet the office was. There were no chairs in the waiting area but only two solid benches where a dozen persons could sit. To my left, in the corner was a coffee table, which contrasted with the aesthetics in most NGOs offices in Niamey. And to my right was a water fountain that several employees and visitors used while I was still waiting. Unlike most international NGOs, AMA has no air conditioning but only a ceiling fan, and on the walls there was only a picture of the Kaaba and two information boards. Similar austerity characterizes the Basora vocational training centre.

52 While one could concede that there is no Islamic development as such, as my interlocutors have suggested, from the perspectives of the actors and agencies I have observed, one of the main guiding principles includes following Islamic norms. In some instances, being Muslim can even be a prerequisite, as I found out on my second visit to the AMA headquarters in Niamey. On this occasion, on the information board hanging across the waiting room, one could read several calls for scholarships for which the requirement was to be a "good Muslim", which confirmed the findings that initiatives can also be devoted to "capturing souls" (Weiss 2002).

53 In showing how Muslims organize, manage, support and implement activities, Islamic NGOs such as AMA are better positioned to emulate and inspire other Muslims. This emulation could be the turning point in Muslim efforts to alleviate the hardship of the needy and the poor in a country where over 60% of the population lives below the poverty line. For example, the 0% interest rate that regulates lending policy is said to be the materialization of an Islamic moral order that rejects capitalist practices. Humanitarianism then also becomes part of the Muslim faith and life. Ali,[28] the director of an Islamic agency I met in Maradi in July 2008, stresses this point and argues that such recommendations are already defined in the Islamic tradition as alms giving and solidarity are key values in Muslim social life. He insists that, *mu'amala*[29] ensures that you care about and are sensitive to the hardships of your neighbors and therefore share the products of your good fortune with them. He recalls a powerful image in the local popular saying that goes "you should never leave your neighbors with only the good smell of the dish you cooked,[30] you owe them a share".

Concluding Remarks

54 The 1990s in Niger were a period when faith mattered and the restructuring of both the public and the Islamic spheres led to a liberalization of Islamic initiatives. This has affected not only how Muslim organizations view themselves as public actors but also how they operate in a socio-political context that has established the state's non-interventionism as a principle of good governance. In fact at the end of the 1990s, Muslim voices concerned about social policies persistently demanded that Islam be taken into consideration in governance (Sounaye 2005). Some of these actors, as they join forces with international agencies and transnational organizations are making access to water, healthcare, food security and humanitarian assistance priorities in their actions.

55 As illustrated by the actors I have presented in this contribution, doing development in an Islamic manner can be understood and practiced differently. But, for both Idrisa and AMA, contextual constraints seem to be major factors that shape their views and initiatives. Seeking more development results on the ground, actors like Ben Ali and AMA are pushing for more managerial skills, accountability and responsible ownership. For their part, Idrisa and Fauzya are seeking behavioral change while they ground their pro-development discourse in Islamic scriptural tradition. The Qur'an and the *Hadiths* are then used in counter-boycott discourses to ease reception and then behavioral change. The idea of Fauzya as an Islamic organization is therefore one that supports, justifies and promotes a modern social project. That he is fighting for the well-being of Muslims in Niger is the salient trait of Idrisa's claims. "We campaign for development based on the Islamic tradition" is how I heard him summarize the work of his organization. "We are establishing a lasting relationship," Ben Ali concluded.

56 These series of claims may be suspected and problematized, but what development means does not seem very problematic for either of these 'developers'. Their serene demeanor is helping them live their lives as pragmatists who have work to do but less a philosophy to devise, even though, as they have both suggested, there is no such thing as "Islamic development". Yet they are contributing by doing development based on Islamic values from two different perspectives. Perhaps therein lies the meaning of being a good Muslim for them.

57 Being a good Muslim in the development sector may, however, not be restricted to its humanitarian meaning. In effect, most people involved in non-governmental development initiatives would agree with the suggestion that more managerial skills are needed in community-based initiatives. This constraint of development applies to all developers, whether they collaborate with local communities, state institutions or individuals and regardless of their religious motivation. Both Ben Ali and Idrisa indicate that the problem with development projects is that they fail ethically before they actually fail. Since ethics sustain action, Ben Ali suggests that a better relationship with communities, a community-centered approach to ownership and self-sufficiency could help avoid failed development projects. What remains to be seen however is how these philosophies are helping development to occur on the ground, as the author of my opening quotes expects it.

58 From this elaboration, it appears that Islamic faith-based organizations like AMA are operating in a context where they are trying to reconcile the urgencies of two different frameworks: the international and managerial one based on pure rational operations, and the ethical, normative and religious framework it finds in Islam. As for Idrisa, he is not only being a broker; he is also involved in a legitimating combat that opposes two categories of Muslim leaders: those who represent the establishment and are criticized for their lack of mastery of the Qur'an; and those who, like himself, claim to be the light that would dissipate the obscurantism of the others. By operating as they do, AMA and Idrisa illustrate two modes of intervention that alter the perceptions of both Islam and development by inviting Islamic principles to shape their perspectives and give meaning to their initiatives.

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NOTES

1. Dnyanada, Ben Ali, Idrisa, Habu and Isa are nicknames I have given to my informants to ensure their privacy.

2. I would like to acknowledge the Social Science Research Council and the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University that granted me funds in the summer of 2008 to collect part of the empirical data I used for this article.

3. Muslim clerics.

4. I would like to thank the *Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local*, Niamey, Niger that provided me with affiliation and the resources that proved helpful in writing this article. Thanks also go to my Fall 2009 Development Studies students on the Boston University Niger Program. Their questions and curiosity inspired the thoughts I present here. I also want to thank Sue Fono Nya who commented on an earlier draft of this article.

5. Human Development Report, United Nations Development Programme (2009).

6. Cheick Ismael, interview, August 2004 and Alpha Khalid, interview, July 2008. See also Sounaye (2009).

7. *Zakat* (Arabic): alms giving, obligatory charity. This is one of the five pillars of Islam.

8. Ben Ali, AMA Programme Manager, interview, 15 March 2010.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Isa, AMA Programme Assistant, interview, 22 February 2010
13. Ben Ali, AMA Programme Manager, interview, 15 March 2010.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Habu, AMA Programme Assistant, interview, 17 January 2010.
16. The notion of 'ordinary Muslims' refers to Muslims who are commoners and not engaged in activism.
17. Ministère de l'Intérieur et de la décentralisation, liste des Associations Islamiques au Niger.
18. Among the most visible, one could count the *Association pour les Œuvres Islamiques et Sociales,* the *Association pour la Promotion de l'Enseignement de la Langue Arabe et de l'Education Islamique,* the *Association Jamiyat Nassirat Dine,* the *Réseau Islamique de la Lutte Contre les IST/VIH/SIDA,* the *Association Islamique des Jeunes pour la Coordination et le Renforcement des Activités de Développement,* the *Alwafa, Ligue pour l'Unité et la Solidarité Arabo-Africaine,* the *Association des Femmes Musulmanes pour les Œuvres de Bienfaisance et de Développement,* and the *Groupement des Associations Islamiques en Matière de Planification Familiale et de la Promotion de la Femme en Islam*, a group of Islamic associations and *ulama* that have helped UN agencies popularize concepts such as family planning related to social development.
19. *Fauziya*: from Arabic, meaning victorious or successful, one who wins. By choosing this name, Idrisa and his colleagues wanted to stress the positive contribution their organization would have on "opening people's eyes" (*wayewan kay*, in Hausa).
20. Idrisa, Fauziya leader and workshop trainer, interview, 25 February 2010.
21. Expanded Program on Immunization.
22. Source: *Programme Élargi de Vaccination*, Internal Report, 2010.
23. Idrisa, Fauziya worksho trainer, interview, 25 February 2010.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Alms giving. Unlike *Zakat*, *Sadaqah* is not obligatory.
26. Endowment.
27. My translation of the following: "Notre prophète Mohamed (S A W) nous a montré à quel point il est important de donner de l'eau à nos frères et sœurs en payant un puits auprès d'un juif lorsqu'il a quitté la Mecque pour Médine." Sahel Dimanche, 1365, 20 November 2009, p. 4.
28. Ali, AMA executive in Maradi, interview, 29 June 2008.
29. Social interaction, civility.
30. *Dag'guia*, in Hausa.

ABSTRACTS

The rare literature on Islam in Niger that has addressed the contribution of Islamic organizations to the broad domain of development, has most often focused on the controversies involving these organizations, their elite entrepreneurs on one side, and state officials on the other side. Criticism and rejection have not been the only attitudes toward state-sponsored initiatives. Participation has also been a pattern of these interactions. Whether with family planning or HIV/AIDs projects, ulama have contributed if not to run these initiatives, at least to raise awareness among communities across the country. In addition to local organizations, many international Islamic agencies have initiated several well-digging programs, charity programs and assistance to undertrained young Nigeriens. This has given "Islamic development" a materiality since the

emergence of an Islamic sphere seeking to provide Islam with a normative role in all domains of public life. For a long time development has remained the preserve of the state, in particular because of the theoretical assumption that state mediates development. With the emergence of a civil society in the 1990s, this statist consideration gave way to the philosophies of "local development" stressing the local appropriation of development initiatives. With the idea of doing Aid and assistance the Islamic way, a universe of discourse has opened up enriching the problematic of development by emphasizing the faith factor. This contribution looks at how Islamic development actors intend to promote and mediate development by focusing on communication, managerial skills and ethics.

La rare littérature sur l'Islam au Niger qui porte sur les organisations islamiques participant aux processus de développement se focalise le plus souvent sur les conflits qu'elles entretiennent avec l'État. Or, les relations entre pouvoirs publics et organisations islamiques sont aussi fondées sur des collaborations. Ainsi s'agissant de la planification familiale ou des projets de lutte contre le VIH-Sida, des ulamas contribuent à ces initiatives en sensibilisant les populations partout dans le pays. En outre, elles initient des programmes de charité. Ce « développement islamique » révèle combien la sphère islamique s'investit dans différents domaines de la vie publique alors que pendant longtemps les politiques de développement sont restées un domaine réservé de l'État. Avec l'émergence d'une société civile dans les années 1990, cette considération est remplacée par des idéologies du développement fondées sur l'appropriation locale. L'idée de faire de l'assistance et de l'aide selon une « voie islamique » ouvre à tout un registre de discours mettant l'accent sur le facteur de la foi. La présente contribution traite des manières par lesquelles les acteurs islamiques du développement promeuvent des formes singulières de communication, de compétences de gestion, et d'éthique.